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AUTHOR Stephens, Robin; Baley, Patrick
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ABSTRACT

The Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth is a 3-year model program housed at the Child Development and Rehabilitation Center of the Oregon Health Sciences University (Portland). The network is designed to set up support groups featuring as a role model a person with a disability. Specifically, the model sets up a project which (1) creates an advisory council to identify priorities, make community contacts and advise staff; (2) adapts and develops material and curricula; (3) trains facilitators to establish and conduct support groups; (4) establishes groups and a network and provides technical assistance to facilitators; (5) conducts a series of workshops in employability skills; and (6) provides technical assistance and disseminates useful information to schools, agencies, and interested persons. Currently, the network is composed of 10 groups which function as a safe place for disabled youth to discuss topics concerning themselves, their disabilities, work skills, and individual potential. Facilitator pairs include a professional service provider and an adult with a disability who acts as a role model. Careful selection and training of co-facilitators are essential to the program, as is recruitment of appropriate youth for the groups. A chronology of project activities for the first year is appended. A hand-out sheet is included, dealing with the what, who, why, how, where, and when of the network. (CL)

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EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT NETWORK OF DISABLED YOUTH

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WHAT?

The purpose of the Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth is to develop a network of support groups. The groups will be facilitated by a person with a disability who serves as a role model and a person who represents a sponsoring agency. There will be at least six youths with disabilities in each group. Groups will meet once a week for at least five months. After the initial five months, the support groups will be self-sustaining.

WHO?

The network is made possible by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to the Child Development and Rehabilitation Center of the Oregon Health Sciences University. People with physical, mental or emotional disabilities are eligible for services.

WHY?

In order to become good candidates for training and employment opportunities, youths with disabilities need to be aware of their potential and their abilities. They also need job readiness skills, communication skills, and a positive self-concept. Support groups are vehicles to develop those skills and provide the necessary encouragement to the group participants.

HOW?

Trained facilitators will establish and lead the support groups. Utilizing counseling strategies and instructional techniques, they will assist group participants in the development of skills necessary to seek, acquire and maintain employment.

WHERE?

The network of support groups is being established in the Portland, Oregon area in the first year, and statewide in the succeeding two years.

WHEN?

This three-year grant began September 1, 1984. The first training session for facilitators will be held in December, and support groups will begin meeting in January, 1985.

If you are interested in starting a support group, becoming a facilitator or group participant, or would like more information about this project, please call Robin Stephens, Project Director; Pat Haley, Project Coordinator; or Diane Viehe, Administrative Assistant, at 225-7522. We'd love to hear from you!

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THE EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT NETWORK OF DISABLED YOUTH: USING ROLE MODELS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Robin Stephens and Pat Haley

1.0 OVERVIEW

The Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth is a three-year model program housed at the Oregon Health Sciences University's Child Development and Rehabilitation Center, a University Affiliated Program in Portland, Oregon. Funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the staff include a .8 FTE director, a .3 FTE coordinator, a 1.0 FTE administrative assistant, and twenty facilitators who work 15 hours per month.

The Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth model sets up a project which 1) creates an advisory council to identify priorties, make community contacts and advise staff; 2) adapts and develops materials and curricula suited to the training needs of youth and facilitators; 3) trains facilitators to establish and conduct support groups; 4) establishes groups and network and provides technical assistance to facilitators; 5) conducts a series of workshops in employability skills; and 6) provides technical assistance and disseminates useful information to schools, agencies and interested persons.

Support groups are the core of the program. Each of the ten funtioning groups has two co-facilitators. One facilitator is a working disabled adult who serves as a role model and who has made a successful transition from school to the work world. The other is a professional service provider or educator. The role model facilitator serves an important need in the group. The project found that many youth with disabilities have never had the opportunity to be in contact with adults who are disabled. Many youth with disabilities believe there is no future for them, that they will die after high school, or that they will be "taken care of" by mom and dad. A role model who understands and gives guidance and support can assist these youth to recognize their potential.

This project is a support network. The youth, themselves, support one another and form networks among each other.

The network is <u>not</u> intended to function as a therapy group or a "class" in job skills. It is a support group; a safe place to discuss relevant topics regarding themselves, their disabilities, work skills, and individual potentials.

Youth in general, and particularly youth with disabilities, often feel powerless. "Of Disabled Youth" means the program is <u>not</u> FOR them, but OF them. This gives them ownership of the group and the group process.

The Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth serves all types of disabilities between the ages of 16-21: physical, sensory, mental, emotional, and learning. The project will expand throughout the state of Oregon in the months to come.

Groups meet at various sites throughout the Tri-County/Greater Portland area. One group of learning disabled students meets at the North Portland Library. Portland's Mall 205, a large shopping center, has donated a meeting room for use by a group of mentally disabled youths and their facilitators. At this site, not only do participants have access to existing community resources, but are exposed to a large variety of people and job sites. Another group of Educable Mentally Retarded youth meets at the Child Development and Rehabilitation Center, where this project is housed.

The staff try to encourage groups not to meet at high schools because the project tries not to be a continuation of the school curriculum. However, some of the groups do meet at schools because that is the easiest location for them to get together.

Sunnyside Elementary School hosts a group of spinal cord injured youth for their weekly meetings. Madison High School is home to another group of physically disabled young people. Two groups are meeting at Portland State University. One of these groups is composed of college students and potential college students. The other is a high school aged "EMR" group. Groups meet weekly for an hour-and-a-half to two hours.

Each group is very unique. Group members decide what activities and topics they will explore during their meetings. Although the groups are not designed to be school related, sometimes instruction is a key part of the meeting. Some groups are learning money management skills, while others work on interviewing and how to be a good employee. Learning about Vocational Rehabilitation--how to get into the system, use it and get out--is a major discussion topic. Disability rights and laws, and how to assert those rights is another topic of concern. Using mass transit, utilizing want-ads, and job agencies are popular discussion and study topics. Field trips, such as how to be a wise shopper, and trips to potential job sites, are encouraged. Guest speakers are also budgeted and used for group presentations.

A lot of group time is spent with communication skills and building self-concept. If you don't have a good self-concept, it is difficult to make and keep friends, let alone sell yourself in a the job interview.

Phone skills are also very important. Friendships are many times begun and solidified via the telephone. Initial employer contact and informational interviews can be conducted to find out about the requirements of a job over the phone. Use of a TDD/TTY, and how to find and utilize an interpreter is explored with deaf and hard of hearing participants.

The facilitators have many resources, materials and activities to choose from. The facilitator's job is to find out what the group wants to learn about and provide the appropriate resources.

Facilitator training is a key part of the project. Unless you have good personnel who know how to facilitate and allow the youth to run the group, the support group will not be able to offer adequate support to its members. The project has a three-day training session to teach them the skills and resources they will need to become successful group facilitators. Monthly facilitator meetings offer problem-solving, support and training.

There are many challenges to operating a project like the Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth. One of these challenges is recruiting youth. This can be very difficult unless you have daily contact with school personnel. Issues of confidentiality and appropriateness can hinder this process and youth will get lost in the shuffle.

Transportation to and from group is a HUGE problem. Youth get to groups on the bus, parents drive them, or they get there by taxi. This issue is a continuing problem, but it can be overcome with persistence and creative problem-solving.

Another problem is co-facilitation. The two facilitators must work as a team--equal work, equal responsibility. Because most facilitators don't know each other before training, it takes time, patience and lots of communication skills to find the best way to co-facilitate the group. When facilitators appear to be mismatched, project staff intervene to either work out the problems or reassign personnel.

The Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth will be drafting a handbook for schools and agencies to use in replicating the project in their area.

2.0 FACILITATORS

2.1 FACILITATOR PAIRS

A key aspect in establishing an effective network of support groups is finding the right personnel to lead and facilitate the groups. The Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth uses facilitator pairs to lead each of the 10 groups. One facilitator in each pair is a professional service provider from a school or agency that serves disabled young people, while the other facilitator is an adult with a disability who acts as a role model as well as co-leader. It is very important that these two people work well together and know each other's strengths and weaknesses. Group facilitation and leadership are shared equally.

By combining the expertise and professional skills of teachers, counselors, psychologists, and case managers with the credibility and knowledge of working adults who have disabilities that have made a purposeful and successful transition, an exceptionally positive and effective group process evolves. Both group leaders are sensitive to the youth participants' needs, although from different vantage points.

2.2 RECRUITING FACILITATORS

2.2.1 Finding the Right People

Since the project requires facilitators with two very different profiles--community members with disabilities and professional service providers--a variety of recruitment strategies were employed.

Locating interested special education teachers, case managers, counselors, psychologists and other professionals in the field was relatively easy. Letters and phone calls to schools, colleges, agencies, group homes, sheltered workshops, and organizations serving the disabled population, brought the project into contact with a large number of potential facilitators. Media coverage also was used to make the project needs known to the community.

Finding adults with disabilities proved to be somewhat more difficult, although not impossible. Project staff contacted state and private agencies, including Vocational Rehabilitation Division, United Cerebral Palsy, and Easter Seal Society, as well as colleges and other schools. However, the most effective technique in locating adults with disabilities who were appropriate and willing to serve as group leaders was by word-of-mouth. The local disabled community circulated information about the project and the type of personnel to be hired. Over half of the successful

applicants first heard of the Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth through this means.

2.2.2 Required Skills

Potential facilitators were told they should possess strengths in some or all of the following areas:

1) Have knowledge and experience in the area of employment of people with disabilities;

2) Be successfully employed or be active as a volunteer in the community;

3) Have experience in educating, counseling or other work with youth;

4) Have experience in working with or relating to people with disabilities;

5) Have demonstrated an ability to work under stress, be punctual and reliable, and work with co-workers and supervisors;

6) Be able to demonstrate an awareness of the social-psychological needs of youth and people with disabilities;

7) Have had some experience in facilitating groups or demonstrate an ability and willingness to learn facilitation skills;

8) Be able to attend training sessions for facilitators attend monthly facilitators' meetings, and conduct weekly support groups.

2.2.3 Selection

Thirty-four potential facilitators were screened in an interview format by project staff. Applicants were scored on specific answers to questions as well as general quality of interaction during the interview. The top 10 disabled community members and the top 10 service providers were invited to join the project staff. Not all of the top 20 applicants chose to accept the facilitator positions. This was due to the fact that some found they were too busy to participate at the desired level. Others felt that 15 hours a month did not meet their financial needs.

2.3 FACILITATOR TRAINING

Training of facilitators is an integral step in ensuring the success and effectiveness of a support group network. The project required that group leaders attend training sessions that totaled 24 hours. Facilitators received no compensation for this time during this training.

Major goals were to introduce and acquaint facilitator pairs, instruct them in the basic tenents of group facilitation skills, familiarize them with materials, resources, curricula and activities, and offer whatever technical assistance might be necessary.

Specific topics and presentations include:
- Disability Awareness
- Job Readiness Skills
- Helping Youth Understand Their Disabilities
- A Panel of Past Facilitators Describing Their Experiences
- Facilitator's Guide to Support Group Interaction (Full-Day Presentation)
- A Grab Bag of Activities for Support Groups
- Networking
- A Separate 4-Hour Work Session for Each Pair of Facilitators
- Increasing Self-Concept of Individuals with Disabilities
- Movies and Videos
- Job Training Partnership Act
- Vocational Rehabilitation Division: How to Get In, Use the Service, and Get Out
- Resource Sharing Table

2.4 FACILITATOR'S SUPPORT

The job of facilitator is difficult, and time-consuming. The task can be especially frustrating and overwhelming for a first-time facilitator. A support system for the facilitator is very important and is a continuing need.

Staff were always available for assistance and encouragement. Many hours were spent on the phone and in person with individuals or facilitator pairs.

In addition, facilitators were paid to attend a once-a-month, two-hour training session support group. Part of the meeting was spent supporting each other, sharing problems, solutions, and resources. The remainder was usually spent in more training. These meetings were very valuable.

3.0 YOUTHS

The Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth is targeted to serve young people, ages 16-21, whose disability inhibits or makes more difficult the process of learning about and acquiring employability skills. Specific disabling conditions include physical disabilities, mental disabilities, learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and sensory limitations. Many of these youths may have been involved in a vocational training program in high school. The support groups are not intended to supplant this type of training, but to augment and reaffirm it.

3.1 RECRUITMENT

Finding appropriate youth to fill the groups is, obviously, a key concern. Project staff contacted every high school and vocational training center in the greater Portland/Tri-County area. In addition, contact by phone and letter was

made with hospitals, clinics, physicans, physical therapists, parent advocacy organizations, and agencies serving people with disabilities (Easter Seal Society, Association for Retarded Citizens, United Cerebral Palsy, and various state agencies). Initial contacts were somewhat fruitful, but most needed follow-up to produce results.

Once a list of 60 potential participants was developed, group facilitators were assigned those that were thought to be appropriate for their group. Facilitators then made contact with the youth and their families to explain the program in detail and enlist the young person's commitment to attend the sessions. Referrals continued to come in for several months as the project began to become more well-known.

Criteria used in selecting group members from a list of potentials focus on 1) need of the youth; 2) ability to attend the meetings; and 3) commitment to participate.

3.2 GROUPS

Since each group has a different make up, different formats and goals are necessary. However, all groups meet once a week for five months. Each participant in each group is assessed with formal and informal evaluation procedures, and each participant identifies a long-term individual goal to work toward during the five to eight months of meetings.

Several groups have developed group contracts that delineate ground rules regarding commitment, attendance, participation respect, etc. Field trips and guest speakers are often scheduled to introduce or follow up discussion and activity topics.

Support groups, although they entail some instruction and even some paper-and-pencil tasks, are purposefully designed to not be merely a continuation of school. They are to be an arena where topics regarding employability skills and self-concept can be discussed, learned about and practiced. Also, they are to function as a forum where participants examine, acknowledge and learn to deal with the impact a disabling characteristic has on themselves, family, potential employers and friends. The groups provide a safe, non-threatening milieu for ideas and emotions to be surveyed and analyzed.

4.0 PROJECT HANDBOOK

Project staff are drafting a handbook containing all of the materials, resources and information necessary to replicate the Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth in other communities. Its completion is scheduled for late 1986.Interested parties may contact Robin Stephens at Child

Development & Rehabilitation Center, P.O. Box 574, Portland, Oregon, 97207, (503) 225-8313, for further information.

5.0 CHRONOLOGY OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES: YEAR ONE

See figure 1.

This paper was presented at the National Conference on Secondary, Transitional and Post-Secondary Education for Exceptional Youth. Sponsored by the Council for Exceptional Children and Northeast Regional Resource Center, Boston, MA, March 8, 1985.

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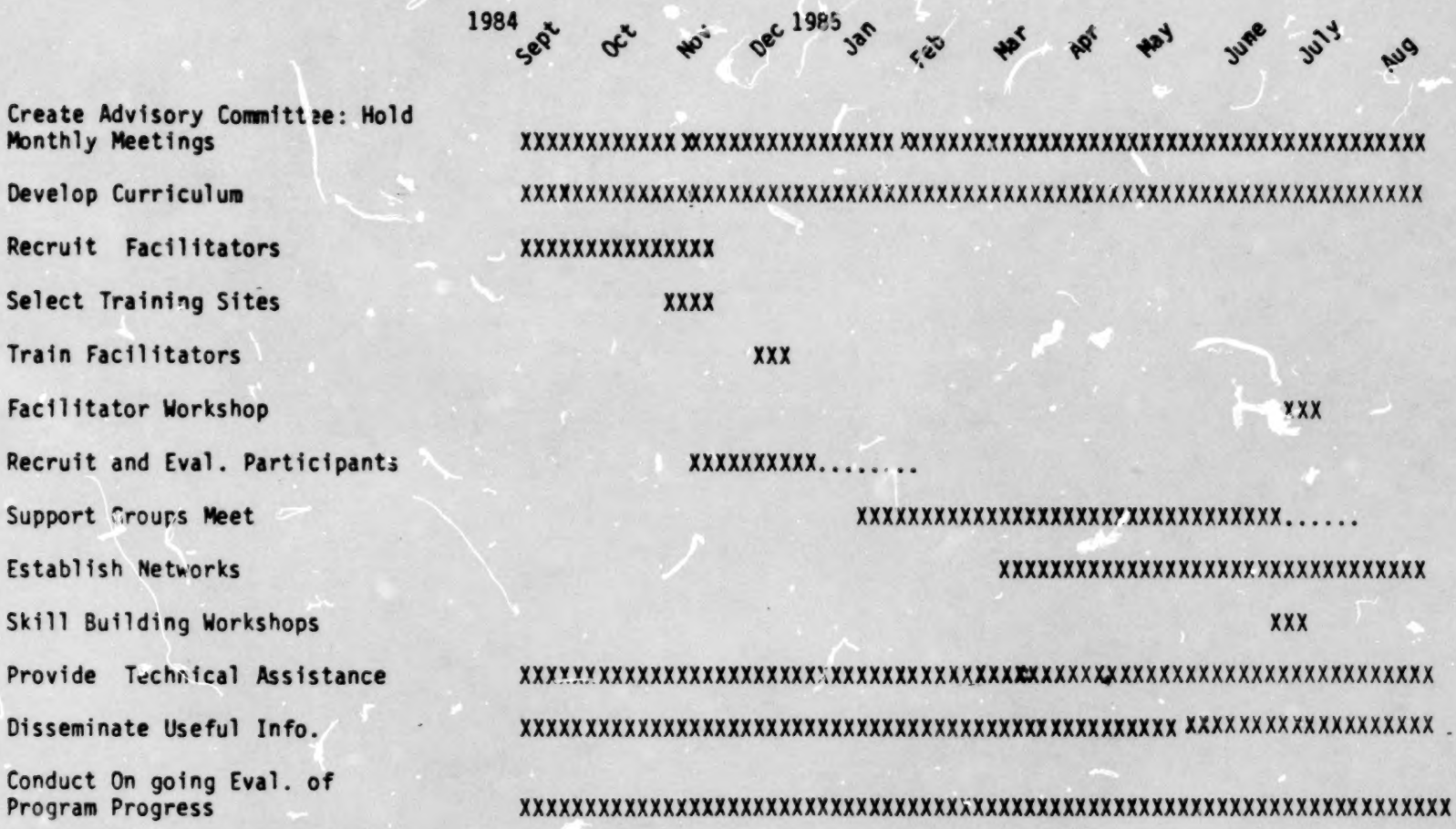
FIGURE 1

Employability Support Network of Disabled Youth Program Chronology



Contact Persons: Robin Stephens, Project Director
Pat Haley, Project Coordinator

225-7522 OHSU/CDRC
P(Box 574
Portland, Or 97207